

Experiment Fourteen by CrystalMoon884

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M, Gen, Mild blood/gore warning, Pretty much everyone is friends with everyone else, Set in Hawkins 1984, Slight Canon Divergence, Third Person POV, mild language warning

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Martin Brenner, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Original Characters, Steve Harrington, Terry Ives, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Max/Lucas Sinclair, Steve Harrington & Dustin Henderson

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Summary:

To the officials working on the MKUltra program, experiment fourteen is the most powerful and hopeful experiment yet, with the ability to surpass any human in physical and mental abilities.

However, when Jim Hopper and El find him, he's nothing more than a scared, confused kid who is on the brink of death.

As Fourteen opens up to El, Hopper and their friends, they learn that the origins of the monsters that had plagued them for months may not be as simple as they had once thought, and as things begin to unravel Fourteen must choose if he's willing to stand with the friends he's always known, or if he'll take a risk and run into the arms of the only family he's ever had.

1. Distrust Runs Deep

Author's Note:

I had this idea halfway through watching the second season of Stranger Things, and then when no explanation was given as to why and how the Demogorgon was around in the first place, my headcanon somehow made sense to me.

I will also be calling 'Eleven' El and Jane, mostly just because 'Eleven' was what she was called when she was an object, and Jane is the name that her mother gave to her. (But I love it when Mike calls her 'El', so we're sticking with that)

The events of the first chapter happens just a couple of days before El escapes from Hawkins lab.

(Edited as of November 8th, 2017)

Enjoy!

“I bet you’re all wondering why I’ve called you here today.”

Martin Brenner’s voice ricocheted off of the wood-panel walls that made up his favorite meeting room. Brenner loved this meeting room because it was so far away from the experiments, and it would give him enough time escape in case any idiot opened up something that they couldn’t close. Although Brenner understood that most of his underlings were trained professionals, he was uneasy at the fact that most of them had been hired by the US Department of Energy and not him directly.

As a general rule, Brenner didn’t fully trust anyone that he hadn’t hired himself.

As different colored pairs of eyes – every color from grey to black to green to brown – glared, stared and gazed at him, each with a different level of hate, loyalty and trust in them. They belonged to the scientists who were trusted with the responsibility of taking care of the experiments. At one time, there had been twenty experiments, each with a physic ability and a tattoo of their number on their arm. Now, due to accidents and murders, there were only sixteen of them left.

“You may leave now, Stacy.” Brenner ordered without looking up at his assistant, Stacy. She was a young brunette who always wore her hair up in a tight bun and heavy makeup that made her look much, much older than she really was. Brenner could hear the sound of Stacy’s high heels click on the tiled floors as she walked out of the room. She was no doubt going to take a long break, Brenner had been working her pretty hard this past week, what with an inspection coming up soon and all. “Now, ladies and gentlemen, let’s get right down to the matter. We’ve had a breach in protocol.”

The wood-panel walls in the room became the most colorful things in the room as the color drained from each of the scientists faces. They were each very much aware that they were working in a very secretive and protected branch of the US government, and they knew that their very jobs were a breach of protocol. However, they knew that when their boss came to them and told them that he had witnessed a big enough breach in protocol that he needed to warn them, that they should be afraid.

And even more fearful if it was their screw up that was the reason that Brenner had called the meeting.

It had once been said that there were no atheists in a foxhole. Well, the same could be said of anyone who had ever went to a

meeting that was run by Martin Brenner. His cold, calculating eyes looked upon each of the scientists – some of them looked the part of the brilliant mastermind, but others look just like a normal person – that each knew that they were collectively in deep trouble. Those who smoked, the ignorant bastards, began to light up a cigarette between their teeth to ease their nerves.

Cigarette smoke and dread were thick in the air as Brenner again looked around the table that he and his underlings sat at. They were sixteen scientists strong, though Brenner was reaching to consider them all ‘scientists’. As he looked around at the people in the room as him he saw under the flesh and blood of these people. They were each suffering from a different mental illness. Anyone who worked in his field was, to still be there.

There was the common sociopath, the common psychopath and the couple of schizophrenics that made it into the ranks of Hawkins laboratory. As Brenner’s eyes hungrily gazed at his coworkers, he saw nothing but a myriad of daddy issue riddled, PTSD and Stockholm syndrome suffering children who felt the need to take their horrible childhoods and nightmares out upon children who they considered to the ‘problem’ with the world.

When Brenner thought about this, he smiled.

“Are you referring to the issue of experiment Fourteen, sir?” Barbara Mueller, a woman with thick-rimmed glasses and lust for blood asked. Brenner knew that she had given over her own daughter to Hawkins lab to experiment on to see how LSD would affect a young mind that hadn’t yet reached puberty. Mueller had been less than pleased when she learned that her daughter had failed in the trials through death, and hadn’t shed a single tear at the funeral.

“Yes, Mrs. Mueller, that is exactly what I am referring to.” Brenner nodded solemnly and fold his hands together on top of the wooden table that sat in front of him. The table was real wood, Brenner had made sure of it when he had had the place furnished. His blue eyes glazed over the sixteen scientists who were just registering the loss of Fourteen. Some showed fear, but he could see an animalistic bloodlust in the eyes of others. “This failure is first of all inexcusable, and secondly it must be dealt with. Now, I haven’t the faintest idea who caused this complication in my lab. Where is the guilty party?”

The silence that fell over the room was something close to deafening. The few scientists who smoked took long drags as they brushed worry from their minds for a quick second. As long as they weren’t a part of the guilty party that Brenner was talking about, they didn’t have to worry right at that very second. The worrisome and anxious eyes of the scientists who feared that they had done something wrong just by being at Hawkins lab were moving from face to face as they tried to find the guilty party.

Brenner knew exactly who the person who had messed up was. Aaron Kline was the guilty party. He was a timid, nearly useless boy who had no idea what Brenner’s vision was. Kline had been working with Fourteen earlier today, while Brenner was working with Eleven to try and push her abilities to their limits again, Kline was busy working with pushing Fourteen’s abilities to the limits. However, Fourteen’s abilities had much *different* limits than Eleven’s did, and that had led to Fourteen escaping.

“It was m-me, Mr. Brenner.” Kline raised his hand just a couple of inches from his head, as though he were a child in grade school again. This angered and amused Brenner in equal parts as he looked at Kline, it reinforced Brenner’s vision of Kline as just a child who was ignorant beyond his years, and it also made Brenner angry that

the US Department of Energy thought that Kline was good man for Hawkins lab. “And, I believe that the only option of bringing Fourteen back is to send a specialized team – I believe you call them ‘foxes’ – in to go get him.”

Aaron Kline was a stocky man who stood only a couple of inches taller than most of the women in Hawkins lab. He was very mouse-like and his inability to stand up for himself was something that stood out right away even to the unobservant passerby. Brenner thought that he looked like the kind of man who would wear glasses, and the kind of man who would chronically wear bow-ties. Kline did neither of those things, but he did always wear a simple, white button-down shirt under his lab coat.

“And why is it the only option, Mr. Kline?” Brenner’s voice was steady and emotionless, and his eyes were just as devoid of emotion as his tone of voice was. His gaze fell onto Kline. However, Kline still had the same self-destructive streak that Brenner needed in all of his scientists, though Kline did lack the bloodlust. “I do recall telling you to keep the boy under control. Why should I make a fox risk their life when it was a scientist who made the mess? Now, who’s fault is it that he got out?”

“M-mine, sir.” Kline’s face flushed and he looked down from Brenner’s eyes to where Kline’s hands were fidgeting under the table. Kline’s assistants, a couple of equally timid young women who Brenner would have loved to spend some alone time with, hadn’t attended the meeting. Kline had undoubtedly told them to stay back so that he could take the brunt of Brenner’s anger. Brenner found how utterly innocent and ignorant Kline was to be angering and amusing.

“Now, Mr. Kline, we have just a few options left on the table.”

Brenner spread his hands out across the table in front of him for emphasis of the idea of a table. The eyes of all of Brenner's other underlings followed his hands as they moved slowly in circle on the surface of the table. "We can either try and hunt the boy down, like you said, and we will lose money for each soldier he kills, I will remind you. Or we can send one of our, say, *operatives*, in after him. What do you think we should do?"

"I think that sh-should send in one of the experiments." Kline nodded dumbly his head at Brenner's assessment, and Brenner's eyes narrowed and his upper lip curled. Did this man have no self-respect? Was he blind? Did he not understand what came next? "I don't believe that number Eight would be a good choice, or Six and Five for that matter. Maybe Eleven or Two would be best?"

"Do you dare tell me how to run my lab?" Brenner roared as he threw himself up from his chair. He rarely let anger overtake himself, but he wasn't in a good state of mind. Not only had Eleven disobeyed him today, but one of the surrogates had lost her child. Brenner had liked her, so it had made it all the harder to kill her. "First you get rid of one of the most promising experiments that I've come across, and then you dare to tell me how to clean up your mess? I gave you *one job*, and that was to take care of number Fourteen! That was all you had to do, and you've damned that to Hell!"

"Sir, I hope that we-we can find a compromise and –" Kline began to speak but Brenner cut him off with a flick of his left wrist, and he watched with hungry eyes as Kline was dragged away from his sight by soldiers who underpaid and overworked. Brenner was tired of speech. Speech got him nowhere. Speech didn't bring the most promising experiment back. Speech didn't bring back Terry, or Charlie, or Mary Kate. All speech brought were broken promises and disaster.

Kline cried out as the soldiers' hands dug into his arms and his chest as they dragged him away. Brenner could see the pain and the fear in Kline's eyes as they dragged him away like a helpless child. Brenner reveled in the look of fear in Kline's eyes, he drank up the way that Kline's pupils dilated and he looked like a deer in the headlights. Part of Brenner wanted to see what happened next, even though he knew that it was the same for each employee of his that was fired.

A bullet to the neck, right between where the skull and the spine meld together. Then, their corpse is dressed and treated kindly before they finally send the body, in the driver's seat of the employee's car, into a tree where they would be later pronounced dead miles and miles away from Hawkins. The family would weep, and then they'd quietly accept a check from the US Department of Energy, for their 'damaging and painful loss'. Every once in a while, a family member would notice a hole in their story and would investigate.

That family member would end up in one of two places. A shallow grave, or back at Hawkins to be experimented on.

That was how fate had sent Brenner ex-wife, Mary Kate. She had been looking for her dead brother, who had worked at Hawkins lab during a summer internship and had gotten just a little bit too close to one of the experiments – it was Seven, if Brenner could remember correctly – and it had cost him his life. After his death, Mary Kate had gone looking for answers. A few months later, she showed up at Hawkins. A few weeks later, Brenner knew he had fallen in love. He took her away and protected her. But, in the end the damage was done and she slit her wrists in the bathtub of their home.

Just two days after Mary Kate's suicide, Terry Ives had stumbled into a hospital with her sister as she moaned about contractions and

that her baby was going to be coming soon. Brenner had rushed over, ready to see the child that was born of an ex-MKUltra experiment. And, when a crying baby girl was welcomed into the world, Brenner could feel something inside him shift. If he couldn't be angry at the world as a whole for taking away his loves, both Mary Kate and Terry, he could at least take his anger out on Terry's bastard daughter.

"Ms. Bauer, I want you to take over the last of Mr. Kline's research." Brenner pulled himself back into the present and watched as a woman with the most empty-looking eyes Brenner had ever seen looked at him. Cindy Bauer was known for two things. The first was her ability to shut down anyone with just a word, the second was her ability to get men to fold to every will. When Brenner had first hired her, he suspected she might be something, but he learned that she just had that effect on people. "I want Fourteen found. I don't care what you have to do, send every dog we have after him for all I care."

Bauer pretended not to care that she had just been upgraded from watching over a bunch of scientists who weren't told about the MKUltra experiments to getting to track down Fourteen. It was her dream, she got to send in people to what would probably be a suicide mission and she didn't have to bat an eye as she did it, because now it was her job. She had messy blonde hair that fell just past her shoulders, and glasses so big Brenner wondered how she moved her head. Her dead, empty eyes didn't fall upon Brenner, and Brenner was secretly glad.

"If you'll give me access to the hounds, does the same go for the foxes?" Bauer asked as she studied her perfect nails. Brenner knew that most of the fingernails of those who he worked with were uneven and bitten down to the bed, it was just another symptom of the illnesses that they all seemed to suffer from. Bauer, however, didn't have the same illnesses as the others. She was a mystery, and

Brenner didn't know how to feel about that. "One can only do so much with a hound, and a fox is a much more versatile animal. They attack in a different way than a hound ever would, or ever could."

"You'll have access to the foxes when you've found the boy." Brenner's voice carried a kind of absolute power in it that most of the scientists in the room with him shiver. Some were happy about it, but Bauer just looked bored. "I need him found. I can only imagine the kind of experiments we can create when he gets older. Once he's a father – in a controlled experiment, of course – his children will have powers we haven't yet dreamed of. I need him found, modern science cannot afford to lose him."

"Yes, sir." Bauer mimicked Kline's speech and tone with a dry laugh. The other scientists didn't join in Bauer's giggles, and they either shielded their eyes from or rolled their eyes at Bauer. When Bauer was done with her laughing fit her blank eyes once again found Brenner. "I'll start on my new job right away. Oh, and Brenner? I don't need a pay raise for this, as long as I can get at some of the experimentals you keep under lock and key."

Bauer, unlike most of the people that Brenner had hired when he was appointed as director of Hawkins lab, had once been a part of the LSD experiments. She, unlike most who had been a part of the original experiments, had survived and learned how to thrive. However, she wasn't perfect and she was still addicted to LSD. It never interfered with her job, and Brenner was grateful, but he also understood that Bauer could be a liability at times.

"Of course, Ms. Bauer." Brenner nodded and rose from his chair again, only this time the movement was much colder and calculated. Brenner knew what Bauer had a soft spot for: the LSD that was only available at Hawkins lab. It was the nasty stuff that would leave you

on a trip for sometimes weeks at a time. Brenner banned most of his personnel from using it (on themselves or anyone else), but Bauer was a special case. “Just be sure to call in before you use it, and try to use it here so we can help if you get hurt?”

“As soon as we have the boy back, I’ll be taking a celebration trip.” Bauer giggled and a small light behind her eyes was lit. It made her look at least somewhat human, and not the cold, empty shell like how she usually looked. But the giggle that she was making was very inhuman, and it made a few of the scientists uneasy as they sat next to her. “And, if all goes as planned, I won’t be back for *weeks*. I suppose I’ll have to pool my vacation days for that. I can do that, right, boss?”

“Of course, Ms. Bauer.” Brenner said again as he moved in large strides towards the door. Brenner turned around suddenly and looked at Bauer, with murder alight in his eyes. “But if you fail to find the boy, I fear that the last trip you took will be your last.”

Bauer, too cocky for her own good, just smirked at him.

“Lues!”

Fourteen’s cry for his friend and protector was short and quick, much like the name of his friend and protector. Fourteen, who had spent most of his energy trying to get himself free of the prison that he had been living in for years, was tired and on the brink of collapsing. But, now he was in the Dark Space, where he could find whoever he needed to find. And he needed to find Lues.

Panic clawed at Fourteen's throat, and he worried that he might seize up and not be able to speak anymore. His head whipped around as he frantically tried to search for Lues, and he took a few steps forwards but each step sent a shockwave of pain up his body and straight to his head, which only made his headache worse. Fourteen tried to steady his breathing and hold back tears as he brushed away the persistent blood that was dripping from his nose.

"Lues, please come to me!" Fourteen was almost hysteric. He had never gone this long without seeing Lues, not even when he was a baby. Lues had always been there, Fourteen couldn't imagine life without him. Fourteen could remember the first day that Lues had showed up, just after his mother had read him a story, and then a large group of large men in black outfits walked in. Since then, the lab had been Fourteen's home, and Lues had been Fourteen's protector.

I am here.

Fourteen could hear Lues' voice in his head. Lues spoke with the sound of hundreds of voices, some were shouting and some were whispering. His voices were young and old, male and female, soft and rough, human and inhuman. Each one was different, and Fourteen had come to love each and every one of Lues' voices when they all blended into one. Behind him, Fourteen could feel the presence of another being, and a sense of calm filled Fourteen.

Fourteen whirled around and saw Lues standing in front of him, and Fourteen pushed all panic away all at once. Lues had many long arms, some of them were tipped with fingers and others weren't, and some of his arms had joints and others didn't. Lues' muzzle was long

and pointed, much like how a triangle would look. Lues had large nostrils and even bigger eyes that were so many colors all at once. Lues' wings were hidden behind his arms, but Fourteen knew that they were there. Sometimes, in Fourteen's dreams, they would go flying together.

"Lues!" Fourteen nearly broke out into tears of joy as he wrapped his arms around Lues' snout. Lues let out a quick, cold breath from its front nostrils that tickled and Fourteen giggled as he buried his face deeper into Lues' soft fur. Lues' eyes, a kaleidoscope of a million colors and stars and galaxies, looked down at Fourteen with the kind of a love only a mother could show to her child. "I missed you, I'm so glad you're back. Never leave again, please."

Lues let out another breath of cold air from its nose and purred from deep inside its throat. Fourteen rubbed his hand in circles on Lues' snout, he didn't want Lues to leave anytime soon. Fourteen looked down at where his feet seemed to be floating on water that couldn't be consumed. Lues had once told Fourteen that humans do something called 'swimming' in water, and Lues promised to take Fourteen out swimming sometime. Fourteen still didn't understand swimming, but if Lues said that it was going to be fun, then Fourteen guessed that it would be fun.

I will never leave you, Fourteen. Lues promised in its telepathic voice as Fourteen let his shoulders fall as he listened to Lues' voice. He let his fear and trepidation fall away as he rubbed his fingers deeper into Lues' soft fur. As long as Lues was around, nothing would hurt either of them. Nothing would dare. *Now, why don't we go back home? I do not like being here, that girl might find us and you could get yourself hurt, and I could never bear to see you in pain, Fourteen.*

"Don't worry, if she were to come here right now, she wouldn't

hurt us.” Fourteen promised Lues and Lues didn’t believe Fourteen, but Lues knew that Fourteen wanted to protect both of them. Fourteen felt that it was his time to take up some of the responsibility to defend the both of them. Fourteen ran his hand down the long scar that Lues had suffered from one of Brenner’s experiments that had tried to hurt Lues. Fourteen had killed the experiment, experiment Ten. “I’ll protect us, because I never want to see you get hurt ever again, Lues.”

Lues purred in response to Fourteen’s threats against those who wished the pair harm. Fourteen knew that if that girl were to walk into the Dark Space right now and try to hurt Lues, that Fourteen would hurt her just as much. Fourteen buried his face in Lues’ fur and breathed in the scent of safety and happiness that Lues’ presence brought him. With the surge in happiness, Fourteen made move to the Other Space. Fourteen, feeling the ground shift under his feet, closed his eyes in anticipation of going to the Other Space.

Moving Lues and himself to the Dark Space and to the Other Space drained Fourteen more than he could recover from right away. Fourteen nearly fell into Lues’ muzzle as he lost his balance, he hadn’t eaten much today because he didn’t want to get himself sick while he was trying to escape and it was making him slightly woozy. Lues nudged the boy with its large nose and blew out some warm breath to get the boy to wake up in case he had fallen asleep.

Lues didn’t understand how human bodies worked. They were so weak, so inferior to its own body. Lues loved its body with its many arms and its legs, but it hated the scar that one of the children at the lab had given him. Even though Lues distrusted most humans, he loved and trusted Fourteen and didn’t want to see the boy get hurt. Lues didn’t remember much of its birth, but it did remember that Fourteen had always been there, and that they shared a bond. They had been born to protect each other.

“I’m okay, Lues.” Fourteen ran a hand over Lues’ muzzle again as he forced his legs to not crumble beneath him. Lues let out a growl from the back of its throat that said that it thought different to Fourteen’s self-assessment, but Fourteen just sighed and gave Lues a tiny kiss on the muzzle. “Just take me to a place where I can get some rest, yeah? That way, I can lay down and wake up stronger tomorrow morning. I want to be rested for when we build our castle.”

Lues gave a purr in approval and moved its head so that Fourteen’s torso was under its muzzle and then gave Fourteen a boost to climb up on top of Lues’ head and onto its neck. Fourteen scrambled up Lues’ head and neck, and just narrowly avoided kicking Lues in the eye by accident. Fourteen, who was nearly falling asleep where he was standing, wiped at the blood on his nose without a second thought. Once Fourteen was on Lues’ neck, Lues moved two of its arms to make sure that Fourteen didn’t fall off of its back.

Fourteen’s hand brushed against Lues’ fur, and Lues saw in Fourteen’s mind where the boy wanted to go, and Lues moved through the Other Space to where Fourteen liked to hide when things got rough at the lab. Fourteen’s secret hideout was a small house in the middle of a large woods outside of the city that Lues only knew as ‘civilization’. As Lues neared the cabin, it moved its arms and picked up Fourteen and set him down inside the house gently on top of his bed.

The cabin was small, with just one level and one main room and a small bedroom and an even smaller bathroom. There were bookshelves, appliances, basic furniture and the bare essentials that human beings needed to live inside of the cabin, and this put Lues’ mind at ease when Fourteen came here. Lues knew that at least if it left Fourteen alone for a short period of time, Fourteen could take care of himself.

Lues cured its body around the cabin that Fourteen was sleeping inside of as soon as Lues was sure that Fourteen was safe in bed. Fourteen didn't like to sleep with blankets on him, and Lues made sure that he never had to sleep with blankets and had all but stripped Fourteen's bed long ago. Anything that Fourteen wanted, Lues brought him. With a final sigh of breath from its nose, Lues laid its head down onto the ground and let itself relax.

Lues knew that the girl would come for it. Lues knew that the girl would come for Fourteen, too, and Lues didn't like that thought. Taking one last glance at the small, sleeping form of Fourteen, Lues confirmed that the boy was in fact sleeping soundly. Drawing on a little bit of Fourteen's power, Lues thought of the perfect weapon against the girl. Lues needed a creature that wasn't very smart, but that would fight for its life and scare the girl into leaving them alone.

A creature that stood on two legs, with a face that opened up into large slabs of skin with teeth on them that lead towards the creature's mouth, appeared in front of Lues. It was much smaller than Lues, and it was very ugly. Fourteen would have loved to see it, but Lues didn't want the boy to get attached to a creature that may become cannon fodder. The creature was the kind of grey that Lues knew that Fourteen liked the most, and Lues hoped that Fourteen would like Lues' creation.

The creature growled at Lues, but Lues smacked it once with its large arm over the head to let it know who was alpha. Lues growled at it and sent it a telepathic set of directions. The creature, now slightly afraid of Lues, whined powerlessly and Lues helped it slip into the Dark Space, where the girl would find it some enough. Lues hoped that Fourteen wouldn't be too angry that Lues had sent the creature to its death.

The fatal flaw of Fourteen was the price he put on the lives of the creatures that he created. To see them hurt, or dying, put a pain and a fire in Fourteen's soul that Lues had never seen the likes of before. Lues, unlike Fourteen, understood that the death of other creatures – even if they were its siblings – was a necessary part of life. Fourteen had once killed a child just like him because the child had tried to hurt Lues, but in the end the child had only left a scar.

Fourteen was still a child. He didn't understand that death was a part of life, and Lues desperately wanted for it to stay that way. There was no reason for Fourteen to become sad, or scared, or lonely. Not while Lues was around and willing to hunt down and hurt and kill anyone who dared to hurt Fourteen. With a rumbling purr from deep inside of its throat, Lues reached an arm out through a window in the cabin to touch Fourteen's head. His hair was soft under Lues' hand, and something close to love filled Lues' chest.

Lues felt a small tremor go through the ground, and Lues could feel the girl trying to break into Fourteen and Lues' home. Lues' arm sunk a little bit deeper into Fourteen's hair and Lues let out a growl at the girl for nearly disturbing Fourteen's slumber. Lues' multi-colored eyes didn't stray from Fourteen's small body, Lues loved the gentle rise and fall of Fourteen's body when the boy slept. Lues hoped his dreams were happy ones.

I promise I'll protect you, Fourteen, Lues thought, no matter what it takes.

2. D&D Night

Summary for the Chapter:

Lucas, Will, Dustin, Max, Mike and El have a D&D night and watch Star Wars. Hopper takes El back home and bad things happen.

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, so this chapter took me a while to write. Mostly because I've been drowning in schoolwork lately, and my teachers seem to like to assign eight hours of homework every night.

So, if you're one of my teachers who is reading this, please let up.

If you're anyone else, enjoy the story!

“Help! I’m being attacked!”

Will’s cry for help was one of pain and fear. His face showed it, and El could almost feel the waves of trepidation coming off of him. She wished that she could help him, but in the dimly lit basement of the Wheeler house, El feared that she might be too late to save him from the attack that he was suffering. But Dustin wasn’t too far away, and he raised his arm and brought it down hard onto the table as El watched the game pieces of Dungeons and Dragons fly into the air for a second.

“I’ll save you, Will!” Dustin called, and he rolled his dice, which tumbled onto the card table that Mike, Lucas, Dustin and Will used for all of their D&D raids both big and small. Joy and exhilaration were clear on all four of the boy’s faces, and El loved seeing Mike so happy. She did, however, dislike just how noisy the boys could get when they were really getting into the game. Dustin in particular was almost screaming out his commands. “I cast *Magic Missile!*”

“Dustin, you idiot, that has such a low probability of landing and killing any monster!” Lucas shouted as the dice hit the table and Mike all but jumped up from his seat to add up the numbers on the top of the dice. Will and El both craned their necks to see what was going on, even Max was watching from her perch on the couch behind Lucas. “You could get yourself injured if this doesn’t work!”

The tension between Dustin and Lucas mounted as Will nearly pushed the two apart as he tore his eyes away from Mike. El sometimes wondered how the two boys who would fight over the smallest thing while playing D&D could be such good friends. El watched intently as Mike added up the numbers on a sheet of paper, and she watched as he ran his fingers across the papers of playable instances in their raid.

“It’s a direct hit!” Mike yelled as a big, goofy grin broke out across his face, and the whole table went up in cheers. Dustin and Will jumped up from their chairs to high-five each other, as Lucas and Max shared a joyous smile. Max had yet to be fully accepted into the party, and El still didn’t fully trust her. “But, wait, what’s that sound? Do you hear it? Do you feel the rumble under your feet, do you smell the rot of death?”

“Oh no, *please* don’t let it be some kind of boss that we have to fight.” Dustin groaned, and El almost cringed at his tone of voice. He seemed almost too eager to condemn something as being ‘too much work’ whenever he could. This was one of those times, but El found it slightly amusing. She looked down at the puzzle she was putting together, it was of some mountain range she’d heard of before. “Oh man, Lucas, we might need some of those fighting skills. I almost fully depleted my mana in that last attack!”

“I told you it was a risky move!” Lucas threw up his hands and sent Dustin a withering glare. Dustin and Lucas were once again at each other’s throats. They had spars during D&D games, when picking movies, or doing anything else that required both of them stating their own opinions. With a pang of sadness, El remembered that she’d never seen them interact with each other at school. “Now we’re all going to die if this is a powerful monster!”

“The monster is upon you, and it wants blood!” Mike bellowed as his voice got deeper in tone and louder in volume. His hands reached in his small velvet bag of figurines and pulled out a monster with many arms and legs that looked like tentacles. It was painted a deep purple, and it had piercing pink eyes that were positioned on both sides of its head. “Read yourselves for attack!”

Once again, the table went up in chaos. Lucas began to yell out commands to Will and Dustin, Will was trying to follow the directions as the monster crept closer to them. Dustin was screaming about how Lucas’ plan wasn’t going to work, but how he was going to go along with it anyways. Mike was still bellowing ominous messages about how deadly the monster was, and all at once El could hear the sound of dice hitting the paper that was scattered along the table like an impromptu tablecloth.

D&D night was still Will, Lucas, Dustin and Mike’s favorite thing in the whole world, even after everything that had happened with the Demogorgon. Every Friday night, they would huddle around the same old card table and play the game for a few hours. Max would sit behind Lucas on the couch in the Wheeler’s basement, and El would be in her little hideout where she had first slept when she first met Mike. Once the boys were done playing D&D, then they would take some time to show El and Max a movie, so they could understand why they loved it so much.

El tuned away from the table and began to work with her puzzle in content silence. She would slowly fit piece and piece together and then pick out a few new pieces from the large pile that she had made. Joyce – El’s adoptive mom in some ways – and Hopper – El’s adoptive dad, and El had once called him ‘dad’, which had brought him to the brink of tears – had agreed that El couldn’t go to school, but should be solving puzzles and reading and doing math problems as much as she could in lieu of a formal education.

Hopper had taken to reading to El every night before bed, and Joyce would often teach El how to read new things whenever they spent ‘family time’ together. Joyce had decided to teach El how to read a recipe one of those nights, and how to read the most basic sheet music a different night. El learned that while she might not have an affinity for playing most instruments, pianos were fun to play, and Joyce told El that she had a talent for it.

As a gift for doing so well with reading, Hopper had gotten El her own small pocket dictionary so that she’d be able to carry it around with her. He had also gotten her pencils and a large notebook so she could write down things if she wanted to. El was slightly worried about writing, her writing wasn’t anywhere near as good as Mike’s, and not anywhere close to Will’s. Hopper noticed that El didn’t have much confidence when drawing and writing, so he had made it a part of their day to sit down and draw and write about their days.

El loved those parts of the day. They were quiet and peaceful, and Hopper would give El real smiles that would make his whole face look alive and happy. Hopper would draw his co-workers and Joyce and Will and Jonathan. At first, El hadn’t wanted to draw anything. But, after seeing Hopper’s drawings and how happy he looked, El gave it a try. She drew everything she experienced in a day.

Her morning Eggos that she ate with Hopper. The books and puzzles that she finished while he was gone. The math problem papers that he made her do, even though she hated it. The big smile that Steve had on his face when he came to look after her for a few hours each day before Hopper got home. The dinner that Hopper made, and then a little drawing of Hopper and El curled up with a book on El's bed as El fell asleep on Hopper's arm.

Hopper took each drawing and hung it up on the wall. He'd pin them up with anything that he could find, wherever they would fit. The walls of the cabin that El lived in had gained an almost wallpaper of her drawings, each one seemed to be layered on top of one another. The only other people who were allowed to have El's drawings were Mike and Joyce. El would sometimes doodle something just for Joyce, because El loved the way that Joyce's face lit up when she saw it after a long day.

One time, El had given Nancy a small thank you card with drawings of flowers that El had seen in a storybook that Hopper had read to her. It was a book about a butterfly that learned how to fly, and the colors were so pretty and El thought that Nancy might like those colors, too. El thought back to when Nancy had given El all of her old dresses because, in Nancy's words, "a pretty girl has to wear pretty things, and you're the prettiest girl I know".

El would also give Mike pictures that she drew, but she only gave him the most beautiful ones that she was the proudest of. Mostly they were pictures of them together, smiling as they did puzzles together, or read books side by side, or Mike teaching El how to play D&D. In El's pictures, the colors were more vivid than anything in real life, and it made El happy that she could make something so beautiful with her own two hands.

Lifting her head, El cast a look over at Mike, who was currently in the middle of telling a story about Will and Dustin's characters getting themselves into trouble. Lucas and Max both looked shocked, while Dustin looked something close to angry, and Will looked enraptured with Mike's words. A feeling that El couldn't quite place – she had decided to call it 'love' – filled El's chest when she saw Mike. He looked so happy, and she loved it when he looked happy.

Mike had been the most hesitant to let El leave after she had sealed the Gate. Mike had argued with Hopper for what felt like hours about where El was going to go now, each and every time her name was brought up Mike would insist that she stay with him. In the end, Hopper had shot down the idea – for many, many reasons. Mrs. Wheeler would never allow it, it would be unsafe if El were in the city, people might see her and ask questions, she would once again be on the radar of any government agents in Hawkins.

El could still remember the dejected look on Mike's face when Hopper had taken El away. El knew that it was for the best that she not live with Mike, and she had made Hopper promise to her let spend time with Mike and Will and Dustin and Lucas whenever possible. So, a deal was made: El would spend each Friday night with Mike at Mike's house while the boys played D&D, El would usually build puzzles or read, then they'd end the night by watching a movie. Then Hopper would come and take El home, because he got anxious when she slept anywhere but his house.

Tonight, El was excited because they were all going to watch Star Wars together, and she hoped that might she might finally be able to understand some of the references the boys made. Even Max was excited about the movie tonight, Lucas had talked it up from more than just 'boring, nerdy bullshit' as Max had called it earlier. El cast one last look over at Mike, and she saw that he was still talking to Dustin, Will and Lucas. Now, a knowing grin was plastered across Mike's face as he spoke to Will.

Will and Dustin had confided in El that after she had left that Mike had become so unhappy. He would be prone to bouts of anger, he'd be set off by the smallest things. He wouldn't eat Eggos, he wouldn't enter the basement unless someone dragged him down there, he couldn't even say the number 'eleven' aloud without becoming closed off and darkened for the rest of the day. El was happy to see the Mike that she loved wasn't gone for good.

"Mike and company!" Nancy called down the stairs as she walked into the basement. Her hair was put up in a tight ponytail, and her sweater and jeans looked perfect. She flashed El a smile before turning her attention back to her little brother and his friends. "Holly, Mom and Dad are going to be heading to bed soon, and it's nearly seven thirty. I suggest you guys quiet down and start the movie before Hopper gets here at nine, okay? I think that El wants to watch Star Wars more than she wants to sit in the corner building a puzzle."

A blush crept across El's face as the spotlight was thrust upon her without her consent. Mike's face also flushed, as it was him who had asked to have El over on the designated D&D night, and he had promised to keep her company and make sure that she wasn't left out. El didn't really mind not being a part of the D&D game, she didn't really understand it but if Mike liked it, then she would slowly learn day by day what it was about and how to play it.

"So, movie time, guys?" Mike threw himself up from his chair, startling Nancy so bad she nearly fell over. Mike's eyes swept over the faces of his friends, who each showed different levels of enthusiasm for watching Star Wars for what they thought was the millionth time. Dustin wanted to finish their raid first, Will loved Star Wars and wanted to watch it, and Lucas just wanted to curl up with Max for the movie.

"I'll get it set up!" Will volunteered as he shot up from his seat and ran over to the old TV set in the basement of the Wheeler house. El watched intently as Will fiddled with the VCR player and picked up the Star Wars VHS. All around him, Lucas, Dustin, Mike and Max began to put away the D&D game and lay out sleeping bags and blankets on the floor and on the couch for the best Star Wars watching experience.

"You kids have fun." Nancy smiled as she watched them all scramble to get into position before the movie started playing. El slowly rose up from where she was sitting and walked over to where Mike was sitting on the couch. He had a large afghan in his arms, and he offered it to El with a smile. El took the blanket and hopped onto the couch as Will, Lucas and Max sat below her on the floor. "Remember that lights are out at nine when El leaves, okay? No late-night parties, everyone else in the house wants to sleep."

"Yeah, uh huh, thanks, Nancy." Mike waved a hand in Nancy's general direction as he positioned himself on the couch next to El. To El's left, Dustin was creating a nest of blankets around him so that he could keep himself warm and cozy during the movie. Will, Lucas and Max were all laying down in their sleeping bags, but Lucas and Max were just a little bit closer to each other than Lucas and Will were. "Have a good night. Bye!"

Nancy took one last look at the room of pre-teens all huddled in large blanket piles and sleeping bags as they geared up to watch Star Wars. El watched as Nancy smiled at her brother and his friends, and the way that Nancy's hand flew to the pendant on a chain around her neck that Jonathan had gotten her for their one-month anniversary. Nancy's hand expertly found the light switch in the basement and flicked off the lights. Will and Dustin cheered as the lights went out, but their eyes never left the screen.

El heard the sound of Nancy's retreating footsteps as she watched the screen of the TV change to a black backdrop with little pinpricks of light scattered across it. El recognized these as stars. El looked over at Mike, who was just mere centimeters from her, and she let her head fall onto his shoulder. Mike also leaned into El, and El relaxed her body. There was no reason to be on edge when Mike was around, he had proven time and time again that he cared about El and would do anything to protect her.

Being around Mike was something that El wished that she could do more often. El loved Hopper, and she cared deeply about Joyce and her family, but sometimes she wished that she could spend more time with Mike and Nancy and the rest of their family. When El was around Mike, she didn't have to be an experiment from a lab, she was just Jane Hopper, even though he'd never call her that. The movie didn't matter quite as much as being near Mike did.

The movie was strange to El. She didn't understand why the bad guy – who Mike kept calling 'Darth Vader' – wanted to rule everything, or why he wore such a strange face mask. She did, however, like the princess. She was pretty, and she had dark hair like Nancy. El ran a hand through her own hair, which was now almost falling onto her shoulders and had curled into what Hopper called 'ringlets'. El loved her hair, and wanted it to be as long as Nancy's one day.

The one thing that El loved about the movie was when the characters used the force. It was like what she could do, and she watched very carefully to see how they used their powers and how they moved things around. El was surprised and shocked when no blood came out of their noses when they pushed themselves too far, and she tugged on Mike's sleeve when this happened.

He had looked from the screen to El's worried and confused face, and had understood almost right away what had El so worried about the movie. El and Mike understood each other in a way that not many people could understand, but that El could sometimes catch Mrs. Wheeler, Hopper or Joyce observing.

"It's a movie, so they don't really have powers like you." Mike whispered to El as Luke and Darth Vader pranced across the screen in a battle scene. El tore her eyes away from the TV set and looked at Mike. "It's all just special effects. The force is just made up, but what you can do is cooler than the force. And, it's real and not just special effects."

"Special effects'?" El questioned with a slight cock of her head. Mike smiled at her as he searched through his brain for a way to explain what special effects were.

"It's when something that isn't possible in real life is shown in a movie." Mike smiled as he seemed satisfied with his answer. He nodded once and El seemed to understand. The force was a special effect, and so was the spaceship and the clones and the warriors dressed all in white. "Like with the force, or light sabers as a whole."

"Light saber'?" El asked, and Lucas, who was trying to listen to the movie and was tired of getting interrupted, whipped his head around and fixed an irritated glance on Mike and El.

"A light saber is one of those glowing sword things." Lucas snapped, but El could tell that he wasn't too angry. Just annoyed, but not angry like how he was when El had first showed up. "Now be

quiet. I love this movie, and it doesn't ever get old."

Mike reached for El's hand under the heavy afghan that they were both curled up under. El laced her fingers in Mike's and she let her body relax even more into his frame. She breathed in deeply and then closed her eyes, as she felt safe and ready to sleep and rest right now. Mike did the same, and El was able to drown out the sound of the TV – and Dustin, Lucas and Will's cheers as the movie ended – with the sound of Mike's steady, even, perfect breathing.

El let her eyes fall closed as her muscles relaxed and she felt the edges of her senses soften until she blocked out all sounds. Against her cheek, El could feel Mike's chest and she could feel his heartbeat. El shifted so that her arms would be wrapped around Mike's chest and she let out a tiny sigh of happiness as her reposition worked and didn't wake up Mike.

"Hey, love birds, it's almost nine." Dustin lightly shook El's shoulder, and she opened her eyes to see him just a couple of centimeters from her face. As soon as El's eyes opened, Dustin backed up. He didn't want to invade El's personal space, because he knew that she didn't like it when people did that. "Hopper's going to be here soon to pick you up, El, and I don't think he'll like it if you're late."

"How long were we out?" Mike asked as he rubbed his eyes and squinted at Dustin's form in the light of the small lamp on the table next to the couch. El sent a look down at the ground in front of the couch and saw the Max, Lucas and Will were all asleep in their sleeping bags. Max and Lucas' hands were next to each other, and Will was cuddled up with at least ten different stuffed animals that had seemed to consume his small form.

“About a half hour.” Dustin reported with a shrug, and El tried to think of how many minutes that was. Time was still a little bit tough for El, she didn’t fully understand time fully yet, but Hopper was helping her with it whenever he could. Steve would also spend a few hours every week to come over and help El understand some of the cultural things about America in 1983. “Hopper should be here in a few minutes.”

“We should get you dressed.” Mike looked to El and grabbed both of her hands and pulled her up from the couch with a slow and gentle tug. El jumped up from the couch and followed Mike over to where El’s jacket, shoes, hat and mittens were littered on the ground. It was just a week until Christmas, and nights could get very, very cold very, very quickly. “Need some help with your shoes?”

“I learned.” El said in a small voice as she lowered herself to the ground and pulled her shoes onto her feet. Hopper had spent nearly a week trying to teach her how to tie her shoes, and finally, after many failures and a couple of almost-fights, El had learned how to tie her shoes. She tied her white Converse up beyond her ankle without a hitch. El then stood up and shrugged on her jacket and put on her hat to keep her ears and head warm, and her mittens to keep her hands warm.

“I’ll walk you out.” Mike offered with a small smile in El’s direction. El nodded and sent him a small smile, too, and then sent a look at Dustin. He was pulling out his own sleeping bag on the floor, and he climbed into it as El and Mike began to walk up the stairs. Lucas, Will and Max were still sleeping soundly, and they looked so peaceful to El.

As Mike and El reached the top of the stairs, Mike reached out his hand and held El’s hand. El looked at him and noticed that he was

without a coat or a hat or mittens, and she worried that he'd get cold outside if they stood out there for too long. El led Mike to the couch in the front living room of the Wheeler house so they could wait and watch for Hopper's truck inside without getting cold.

"I had fun tonight." Mike looked over at El, and she leaned closer to him just a few centimeters. She could remember when they had first met in the rain, how Mike had been nice to her, while Dustin and Lucas had seemed more weary and afraid of her. She could see the same happiness and slight fear in his eyes now, just like then. "I'm glad that Hopper lets you come over. I wish I could see more of you."

"Me too." El whispered as she leaned closer to Mike. She laid her head on his shoulder as they waited for Hopper, and Mike stared down at El the whole time that they sat together. El felt *safe*, like she could just stay here all night and not have to worry about Papa or the Demogorgon or a Demo-dog coming to get her. Part of her – a very large part – didn't want to leave the Wheeler house. But, El knew that Hopper would never allow it.

"Hopper's here." Mike whispered into El's ear, and he jumped up from the couch in a fluid motion. El jumped off of the couch right after Mike did, and she fixed her eyes on the outside window in the front room of the Wheeler house, where she saw Hopper's truck with the headlights on in front of the house. El, without thinking about it, grabbed Mike's hand and pulled him towards the front door.

El opened the door and pressed on even when the cold wind from the Indiana winter hit her face. El could feel Mike shivering lightly as his chest pressed up against her back before he gently closed his front door behind himself. El knew that Hopper was watching her and Mike, he was over protective and had trouble trusting people even

when he wanted to. He knew that Mike was a good kid, but he was usually quick to assume the worst in people, even when he knew better.

“Goodnight.” El turned around and looked Mike in the eyes as she spoke. Mike’s face flushed and his hand squeezed El’s as he quickly bridged the small gap between them and pressed his lips against hers. El leaned into the kiss and gripped Mike’s other arm with her small fingers. When Mike finally pulled away from El, El pressed her forehead against his and she took a moment to just be with him.

“You should go.” Mike whispered in a tiny voice, and El hated that he was right. She looked at him one last time, and her deep brown eyes locked onto his brown eyes and El lifted the hand that was locked in Mike’s and brought it to Mike’s shoulder. El closed her eyes for a second and savored the small moment and then unlaced her fingers from Mike’s and stepped away from him.

El made the slow trudge through the light snow that coated the ground and sent a short look over her shoulder, and she could see that Mike was still standing out on his porch, shivering harder than before. El knew that that was just like him; he didn’t want to give up on someone if he didn’t have to. And if not giving up meant waiting for them to leave and freezing to death in process, then Mike would take those chances.

With a swift pull of the door handle, El opened the passenger door of Hopper’s truck and jumped up into the old vehicle. The truck wasn’t as messy as it usually was on the inside, and El’s seat didn’t have stacks or books or papers or wrappers on it, and El was mildly surprised at this. Hopper would often use the passenger seat as a storage area in his car when El wasn’t riding shotgun, which meant that he was usually scrambling to clean off the passenger seat when

El was hopping into the car.

“You and Mike, uh, you had fun tonight?” Hopper asked as El closed the car door behind her. El lifted her deep, curious, piercing brown eyes up to Hopper’s face and Hopper nearly squirmed at the look she gave him. El buckled her seatbelt in silence as replayed the kiss over and over again in her head. Mike’s lips were always soft and El loved the way that his ears would carry a blush before they’d kiss.

“Yeah.” El answered Hopper’s question in a distant voice. El stared out the window and watched as the houses of the middle class of Hawkins passed by Hopper’s car in a blur. Most of the houses had wreaths hanging from hooks mounted onto their doors, and most of the houses also had light strung around their roofs. A couple here and there had a man dressed in red clothes with white trim in their front lawn and deer with very large antlers, but lawn ornaments were surprisingly rare.

“So, kid, it’s almost Christmas.” Hopper cast an awkward look over to El to see if she understood what he was saying. El’s brow furrowed as she tried to remember what Christmas was. She knew it was a holiday, and she knew that it happened in winter, but she wasn’t sure what else was done on that day. “And that means gifts, so I was wondering if you had a list of things you might like.”

El was about to open her mouth to reply with her usual answer of ‘Eggos’, but Hopper held up a hand to silence her.

“Nope, you can’t *speak* it.” Hopper shook his head while a small, sneaky smile spread across his face. His eyes carried amusement and some sadness, and El didn’t understand the sadness that was there. “You have write it down. Then we can send it in for Santa to read,

and then he'll get you the presents that you want. And you have to dig a little deeper than just 'Eggos'. I'll help you with your list."

"Is that Santa?" El pointed out the window at the last house on the edge of Hawkins before they came upon the woods that Hopper's cabin was in. There was a man in a red suit with a large sack draped over his shoulder, and he had a huge smile and was waving mechanically. He was aglow with lights that had seen better days, but all in all the lawn ornament looked well-taken care of and loved.

"Yeah, that's Santa." Hopper confirmed as he took a short look out of the window. Wonder bubbled up in El as she tried to figure out how a mechanical man would be able to bring toys and gifts to every single boy and girl in Hawkins, much less the world. El wondered if the man was like her, maybe he had a teleportation ability so he didn't have to walk to every single home in the world.

"And I can read you some old Christmas books." Hopper mused as his mind was lost in happy memories. El didn't understand why she couldn't just read the books all by herself, but she figured that it was just another cultural thing that she didn't yet understand. "Then we can make ourselves some hot chocolate, and we can maybe get a tree to decorate. We'd have to make some decorations first, but I think we're up for that."

"Why would we put a tree in the house?" El turned to Hopper as she furrowed her brow and thought about putting a tree in the house. Mike had said that it was normal for people to do that, and that next week his family would be going out to get a tree from a tree farm. El thought that trees were a funny thing to farm, and she didn't understand the purpose of putting a tree in one's house.

“Well, we do it because it’s fun.” Hopper shrugged and looked at El for a second. His eyes showed a kind of desperate emotion in them, and El could see that he was having a tough time explaining all of this to someone who didn’t understand much about American culture. “Trust me, you’ll have fun, Jane. And the best part is, we’ll be doing this every year at Christmas for as long as you stay with me. And we can even make up our own traditions as we go along.”

“Our own traditions.” El looked up at Hopper with a small smile on her face. She liked the idea of traditions that she and Hopper would share. She’d never celebrated Christmas before, and she didn’t fully understand the concept, but she was willing to do it for Hopper. And she hoped that maybe they would be able to create some traditions, and traditions seemed to be happy things.

“Yeah, our own traditions.” Hopper’s mouth twisted into a small smile and he took a deep breath but he didn’t take his eyes off of the road in front of him. After a few seconds of silence in the car, Hopper turned into the driveway that led to his cabin. He had modified the land around the cabin so that it wasn’t as weaponized and protected as before so that El could have friends over, and so that Steve didn’t have to act like Russian spy to get into the cabin.

As the cabin came into view, El undid her seatbelt and fidgeted with her fingers absent mindedly. Hopper took the car out of gear and pulled the key out of the ignition and grabbed a large bag that he had taken into town with him and lugged it back with him towards the cabin. El jumped out of the car and slammed the door behind her, a habit that she was slowly trying to get rid of. Hopper didn’t mind if she slammed the door, but Steve didn’t like when she slammed the doors on his car.

El walked up to Hopper’s cabin and ducked under Hopper’s arm

as he held the door open for the young teen. El walked past the kitchen and ignored the feeling of emptiness in her stomach. She had eaten some pizza at the Wheeler's house, but she hadn't eaten else all day. She decided to wait to eat something until tomorrow morning, when Hopper would let her eat some Eggos for breakfast.

"After you take off your jacket and shoes, come on back here." Hopper called after El as she pressed her hands onto the door to her room. She looked back at Hopper with her big, brown eyes that seemed to stare right into people's souls. Hopper was smiling back at El, and he looked almost giddy. "I have something I want to show you, and I think you're really going to like it."

El couldn't help but smile at Hopper's joy, and she hoped that it was a really good surprise. The last time that Hopper had surprised her, it hadn't been a very happy occasion. He had gotten her a map of Hawkins, and then had gotten angry with El when she had wanted to go and explore around with the map he'd almost taken it away. They had agreed to pin up the map to El's wall in her room so that she could look at it whenever she wanted, but she couldn't go exploring without an adult that Hopper knew.

No more getting rides from men in trucks.

El could remember how Hopper had told her about 'stranger danger', and even Steve and Nancy had pitched in to tell her about things. Lucas had told her about something called a serial killer, and then Max had piped up that her uncle's second cousin's mother's best friend had once had a housekeeper to who had met a serial killer. After that, El had been given a pretty good fear of strange people.

El pushed her body weight against her door and flicked the light

switch and surveyed her room in the dim light of the dying light bulb. There was her dresser, the map of Hawkins up on the wall, and a book shelf that was packed full of books that Hopper had gotten for El. He had written 'property of Jane Hopper' in each of the book's front covers in his messy cursive-like hand writing. El's eyes fell from her book shelf to her bed, and to the boy who was fast asleep in her bed.

Blood running cold, El walked up to the boy. She figured that a little boy couldn't be dangerous to her, and he looked smaller than her in both body size and age. He had hair that was curly but cut short, it barely covered his ears. El touched his arm and she could feel that he was ice cold, and his body temperature didn't feel anything like El's own temperature, or Mike's. El could remember that Mike had told her that Will had been very, very cold when he had been possessed by the Mind Flayer.

The boy's lips were almost blue, and he wasn't covered by blankets, either. He was in the same hospital gown that El had once worn. He looked like he was shivering slightly, but his teeth weren't chattering nor was his breathing erratic. El reached out for his wrist like she'd seen Hopper do hundreds of times when he was looking after any of the kids if they fell asleep. El touched her pointer and middle fingers against the boy's wrist and she could feel a steady, weak heartbeat against her skin.

"Jane, is something wrong in there?" Hopper's voice had a hint of confusion and paranoia in it, and El whipped around to hear him walking into her room. She wasn't sure what to do with her discovery of the boy in her bed, and she wasn't sure how Hopper was going to react to the boy. "Do you need, um, some help or something? Did you fall over?"

“Boy in my bed.” El said in a small voice, and she could hear Hopper’s hand on her door handle as he walked into her room. His eyes were large and they fell onto the small frame of the boy in El’s bed right away. Hopper’s face drained of all color and El could tell that his brain was running at a million miles an hour. Hopper walked past El and grabbed the boy’s wrist, where he checked for a pulse like El knew he would.

“We need to get him to the hospital.” Hopper’s hand didn’t move from the boy’s wrist, and El wondered if Hopper was ever going to let go of the boy’s wrist. Without a second hesitation, Hopper lifted the boy up and held him bridal style in his arms, and carried him swiftly to where his truck was parked in front of the cabin. El, without thinking very much about it, followed Hopper out of the cabin at a fast pace.

Hopper threw open the door and just barely fit himself through the door frame with the boy in his arms. The boy’s toes brushed against the wooden doorframe, and El watched him closely to see if he would stir from all of the commotion of being handled and then picked up and ran around with, but the boy was still in a deep sleep as Hopper carried him into the car.

“What are you doing?” Hopper caught a glance of El following him around. El was still dressed in her jacket and Converse, and she was ready to follow Hopper anywhere that he went. El squared her shoulders and said clearly – in the form of body language – that she wasn’t going anywhere. She was coming with, and that was the end of it. Hopper, after realizing that he was fighting a losing battle, sighed and gave his approval for her to come along. “You can come, but you can’t come into the hospital, okay? I don’t want anyone to spot you.”

El nodded her head that she understood and gracefully opened up the passenger door of Hopper's truck and slid into her seat. Hopper set the unconscious body of the boy in the tiny backseat of his truck and jammed his keys into the ignition with a fervor that El hadn't seen from him since she had closed the gate. After casting a long look back at the boy, El wondered where he was from.

The hospital gown wasn't a good sign. El had never seen him at the lab, not that she wanted to remember those days very much. He could have just escaped from the 'looney bin' that Lucas had talked about when he had first met El, though El wondered if this 'looney bin' would treat someone so poorly. El could almost see his ribs, and she knew that that couldn't be healthy. He also might be a lost kid who went camping and got separated for a long time and had stumbled upon Hopper's cabin.

However, El ruled most of those possibilities out by how he looked. He had no outward scars or injuries, though she could tell that he thin, too thin, from the way that the hospital gown fell around his small frame. His hair was longer than El's when she had first escaped Hawkins Lab, but it was still very short. He had a few moles dotting his face, but he was without a smattering of freckles.

"Sick." El whispered, and Hopper turned to her the instant that she vocalized. El lifted her head so that her eyes and Hopper's eyes could lock, and she cast another look at the boy. Hopper's eyes showed just how stressed and scared he was, and he turned back to the road as soon as he dared. El watched as his hands tightened around the steering wheel as he took a long breath. El noticed that he had what looked like dirt caked onto his face, right under his nose.

The rest of the drive was silent, interrupted only when Hopper would reach into the back seat to grab at the boy's wrist to feel for a

pulse. Each time he did, a look of relief would dance across his face for just a second, and then he'd focus back on his driving and El would turn back to the boy and wonder again about where he came from. She brushed her hand against his skin to feel that he hadn't gotten any warmer than when she had first found him, even though the car was warm.

When the hospital finally came into view, El shrank away from the bright lights and the cold, white exterior. El hated hospitals, and she knew from the way that Hopper tensed up that he felt the same way. El had been tested on and hurt in a place that was much like a hospital, while Hopper had lost a daughter in a hospital. So much pain had been had in buildings like the one that sat before them.

Hopper had parked in the front parking lot of the Hawkins General Hospital. There were two large, glass doors that had to be opened to be able to walk into the hospital, and El could see a large desk with a worn-out woman sitting behind it. Hopper pulled the car very close to the front doors, but angled so that anyone who might look at his truck wouldn't see El sitting in the front seat.

With only a second of hesitation, Hopper reached into the back to grab the boy – Hopper hadn't buckled his seatbelt, so the motion was a simple one – and once again carried him bridal style as Hopper pushed his door open. El watched each and every move that Hopper made, knowing that she couldn't get out of the car. She watched as one of the boy's arms fell, and in the light of the hospital, El could see a black tattoo on his skin. 014, the ink boasted.

All thoughts flew away from El's mind as she opened her car door and ran after Hopper at near light speed. Hopper had been jogging to the front doors of the hospital, and it had taken El a second to catch up with him. El touched his arm and it made him stop cold. Hopper

was about to yell at El and tell her go back to the car (El could see it in his eyes), but he stopped talking when El lifted the boy's wrist that had been tattooed.

No verbal words passed between the policeman and the pre-teen, but as soon as Hopper saw the tattoo he stopped cold. He held the boy's wrist closer to his face to try and see the tattoo better, and El offered her own to compare the two. Hopper growled from deep in his throat, and El could only guess what that meant. With one final glance down at El and at the sleeping boy in his arms, Hopper continued his walk to the hospital, leaving El alone in the parking lot.

El nearly ran back to Hopper's truck, where she buckled her seatbelt and sat patiently for Hopper to return. Ideas and thoughts careened through El's mind at a pace unknown to man, and El clutched her chest tightly with her arms. Her fingers formed claws as she dug her short fingernails into her ribcage and forced herself to steady her breathing. She didn't know what the existence of that boy meant in her life, and she worried that it might mean that her friends would get hurt again.

El tried to calm herself down and remember what it was like being next to Mike, and how she was going to be taken care of as long as he and Hopper were around. They would make sure that nothing happened to her, and she was going to make sure that nothing happened to them. That was how they protected each other, and El tried to find some shelter in that thought.

Above El, the Mind Flayer loomed, watching over the boy that it had been created to look after.

Notes for the Chapter:

Happy belated Thanksgiving to anyone in the States!

Also, I've never played D&D or seen Star Wars, so I hope it wasn't obvious by the way I wrote, heh.
Have a great day!